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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM KPAO TS

SUBJECT: EU PUTS TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES ON THE TABLE

REF: A. TUNIS 1463

1B. TUNIS 1378

1C. TUNIS 1283

1D. TUNIS 1404

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) EU Charge de Mission Bernard Philippe told the Ambassador on November 15 that he was encouraged that the November 12 EU-Tunisian Sub-Committee on Human Rights had taken up several serious issues, including torture and the 2009 elections. Philippe noted, however, there were a few missed opportunities (e.g. a discussion of corruption). The EU's basic message, which is similar to the USG's, was that Tunisia's economic and social progress affords it the ability to foster increased political freedom. End Summary.

Dialogue on Human Rights

12. (C) Following up on their pre-meeting discussion (Ref A), EU Charge de Mission Bernard Philippe briefed the Ambassador on November 15 about the results of the November 12 EU-Tunisia Sub-Committee meeting on Human Rights. Philippe began by reiterating that if progress is to be made on human rights issues in Tunisia, it is important that the US and EU coordinate their message. According to Philippe, the November 12 meeting (which took place in Tunis) lasted eight and a half hours, and sowed the seeds for a more specific discussion regarding a number of sensitive and contentious issues. The meeting was attended by twelve EU ambassadors to Tunisia, and Philippe opined that it was unusual for the EU to be represented at such meeting at such a high level. Philippe interpreted their attendance as representing the importance the EU attaches to human rights issues. He noted that the Italy was not represented (having no ambassador in Tunis) and that France was represented by its Charge. The Tunisian delegation was headed by Khemaies Jhinaoui, who will be leaving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to become the Tunisian Ambassador to Russia. Representatives from several ministries were present on the Tunisian side, include those from Justice and Foreign Affairs.

13. (C) Philippe characterized the meeting as a whole as constructive and positive, which he said was much to the relief of the Tunisians, who were visibly nervous in the weeks leading up to the meeting. Philippe hopes that ending on a positive note will encourage the Tunisians to agree to follow-up meetings where issues can be discussed more in

depth. (Note: The Tunisians insisted that the November 12 meeting focus on generalities, not specifics, before they would allow the meeting to take place. See Ref A. End Note.)

¶4. (C) During the sub-committee meeting, the EU emphasized that democracy and human rights are a cornerstone of EU policy, and proposed electoral assistance similar to what they provided Morocco in 2007. The Tunisians did not comment on the offer. The EU also proposed that Tunisia allow a joint EU-IMF study of the transparency and efficiency of public finances, framing it as a prerequisite for further financial assistance.

¶5. (C) Philippe opined that the Tunisians tried to shift the discussion away from their human rights record by bringing up the treatment of Tunisian citizens in Europe. Noting that 80 percent of Tunisian migrants are in Europe, the Tunisians raised the question of how its citizens are treated abroad. Both sides agreed to further examine this issue in a joint meeting with the EU's Sub-Committee on Justice, Liberty, and Migration.

¶6. (C) The EU representatives raised the GOT's anti-terrorism campaign's impact on Tunisian civil society. While the EU suggested that repressing political dialogue frustrates and radicalizes society, the GOT flatly refuted the premise that political dialogue is repressed. Rather, they said, journalists can report anything they want to any media outlet. The EU complained about "frozen" EU-funded human rights projects due to difficulties processing the funds. The EU also noted that the GOT has refused to allow UN observers to examine issues such as torture. As such visits fall under the umbrella of various UN conventions to which Tunisia is a party, the GOT said it would consider the issue. Another point of concern for the EU was the treatment of prisoners before, during, and after incarceration.

Missed Opportunities

¶7. (C) Philippe told the Ambassador the sub-committee did not raise the issue of corruption, which he called a "missed opportunity." Discussions regarding judicial reform, meanwhile, were not productive. According to Philippe, the EU had a 23 million euro program to support the modernization of the judicial system, but the Tunisians managed to avoid any and all attempts at a substantive dialogue. As a result, the program's deliverables were mainly equipment (cars, etc.). Philippe was clearly frustrated with the results of the program, and characterized it as "a very negative experience." Philippe told the Ambassador he wished that the sub-committee had emphasized judicial independence more, though he was pleased the subject of administrative reform had been raised. He noted that on many occasions, while the Tunisians listened politely, they were silent and did not offer the opportunity for a real conversation about human rights issues.

What's Next

¶8. (C) As noted Ref A, the November 12 sub-committee meeting will be followed by a November 19 EU-Tunisian Ministerial meeting. Philippe said he hoped this will provide an opportunity to raise topics such as torture and specific human rights cases in more depth and promised to provide the Ambassador with a readout. He commented that the EU compares the relationships it has with various "Neighborhood" countries, and the general consensus is that Tunisia is the most difficult place to have a true dialogue on controversial issues. This has led to a progressive worsening of EU-Tunisian relations, which the EU would like to address while still pursuing progress on human rights issues. Philippe noted that though the EU-Tunisia sub-committee meeting on human rights is only scheduled to take place annually, he hoped that the November 12 meeting

would provide an opening for intermediate meetings on human rights before the next annual meeting in 2008.

Comment

19. (C) The EU and GOT have different perspectives regarding human rights, as evidenced by the GOT and EU each bringing their own annotated agenda to the November 12 meeting. Both the EU and the USG have taken the stance that political reform is essential for long-term progress and stability, but convincing the GOT of the need for political liberalization remains an uphill battle. Though Philippe was positive regarding the November 12 meeting, the Romanian Ambassador to Tunisia (who was also present at the November 12 meeting) told the Ambassador that he felt little was accomplished. The Embassy will continue to encourage information exchange and cooperation, especially with regard to the upcoming 2009 presidential and legislative elections. End Comment.

GODEC